

16 MAY 2004

THE MERCURY

Jackson shoots messenger

ENVIRONMENT Minister Judy Jackson has only herself to blame for the "politics of frenzy" she claims surrounds the issue of possible contamination at Wentworth Park.

Ms Jackson could have dispelled the "climate of fear" which she says some media outlets and the Opposition have perpetrated by handling the concerns of residents over a feared link between contamination at the old Howrah tip site and cancer deaths more decisively.

Instead, she prevaricated for several days while media outlets covered the long-held concerns of residents and the Opposition over the possibility of life-threatening contamination at the site.

"You can't keep on testing forever," she said initially. By Friday, Ms Jackson was saying, "I have been advised that a testing program is warranted and I have accepted that advice."

Backed into a corner, Ms Jackson finally announced the testing program, encompassing groundwater and soil sampling, and an audit of information by an independent expert.

This was the right decision, and Howrah residents are no doubt relieved by it.

Ms Jackson is disingenuous in now blaming the Opposition and the media for helping her do the right thing.

Hysteria

No one wants to whip up hysteria over Wentworth Park.

But the concerns of residents such as Poppy Lopatniuk and the Kerslake family over feared tip-related cancer deaths had not been properly addressed.

Ms Jackson acknowledges herself that concerns about the site have been around for years, over the lives of several governments. It appears proper testing for contaminants had never been done.

The Minister and her advisers would be mindful of the possibility of other Tasmanians calling for the testing of suspected contamination sites. There is a cost factor here.

But testing Wentworth Park will hardly break the Budget. It will hopefully help to put long-held fears to rest.

There are times when ministers should put aside advice from bureaucrats, evaluate problems themselves and make independent judgments.

Any climate of fear in Howrah has only been compounded by ministerial dithering.

THE MERCURY

Jackson bows to pressure

THE State Government's investigation into the possible toxic contents of the former Howrah tip site is a victory for people power.

Little may have been done if not for the determination of former Howrah resident Poppy Lopatniuk, Anna Burns of the Kerslake family and the State Opposition.

The awful history of deaths due to cancer in the Kerslake family, including that of one of Tasmania's brightest public servants, Mark Kerslake, could not be ignored.

The testing program at what is now Wentworth Park, and the audit of old and new information for assessment by an expert, should help allay fears about contamination at the park.

Ms Anna Burns revealed to *The Mercury* a history of family usage of the tip as a thoroughfare that could have contributed tragically to the deaths of her brother, mother, father, cousin and uncle to cancer.

Ms Jackson says she understands the fears and concerns over the site which have arisen this week. These fears and concerns were only heightened, however, by the Government's reluctance to act decisively.

Hazardous

The Government relied too heavily on advice from the Department of Health and Human Services that there was no evidence to suggest a pattern of specific cancer types or other diseases being contracted around the tip site.

This was inadequate when the Menzies Research Institute, which provided the Health Department with data, said its cancer registry was only able to determine cancer reports by suburb and could not narrow information down to individual streets.

Ms Jackson says there is no basis for believing that the Wentworth Park site poses an environmental risk.

Nevertheless, the testing program will encompass groundwater and soil sampling.

No one can guarantee what lies beneath the surface of the park. Although the former tip was for domestic waste, the dumping of cancer-causing hazardous chemicals in the 1960s and 1970s cannot be ruled out.

The deaths in the Kerslake family and the 21 listed by Mrs Lopatniuk certainly raise major questions about environmental hazards.

After years of anxiety about their health, Howrah residents are close to learning the truth about Wentworth Park.

THE MERCURY

Out of sight, out of mind

THAT distinctive ritual — the trip to the tip — is performed with an alarming lack of environmental awareness by many Tasmanians each weekend.

Few councils, if any, across the state could give a cast-iron guarantee that everything being dumped hastily from the trailer or truck is environmentally friendly.

Many of the state's 176 landfill sites are undeniably sources of serious contamination, yet the State Government's view of the mounting problem appears to be out of sight, out of mind.

The Government's own State of the Environment Report warns: "The number of suspected but not confirmed contaminated sites in Tasmania is unknown but is likely to be in the order of many hundreds."

Mrs Poppy Lopatniuk, whose son Peter died of leukemia, has performed a community service in putting the threat of landfill contamination to public health on the environmental agenda again.

Mrs Lopatniuk fears that many people who have died of disease, including her son, have been the victims of contamination at the old Howrah landfill site.

Some may doubt that she has a thoroughly convincing case linking disease with the site, but the general issue of contamination that she raises cannot be swept under the carpet.

Threat

Public health director Roscoe Taylor says there is no evidence to suggest there is a pattern of specific cancer types or other diseases being contracted around the site. This is reassuring.

But as Opposition environment spokesman Jeremy Rockliff says, landfill sites are a "potential timebomb" that need urgent attention.

Where are the 176 landfill sites located across Tasmania? Generally speaking, what do they contain?

The Government's own environmental report has raised the alarm about contamination and the threat to ecosystems and public health.

The community would expect the Government to take possible groundwater contamination more seriously. An inventory of old and current landfill sites of significance would be a good way to start.

The health of Tasmanians should not be put at risk by the environmental sins of their forefathers.

Testing for contaminants must become standard procedure for landfill sites. That includes those used in the past that may have left a deadly legacy.